



Making Distinctions

By Teresa Pitt Green

During early counseling for childhood experiences of sexual abuse, there were tough truths. One was that my mood was suddenly crashing—and my mental clarity suddenly blurring—simply because a single image could trigger an overwhelming emotional memory. My therapist suggested a phrase to reverse the trigger: “This time is not that time.” The practice proved astoundingly helpful, drawing me out of the past like a lifeline, but I was still angry. I had run from the past madly, believing I could be free, but I had not managed to escape after all.

Reaffirming this distinction between past and present continues to help me function. I’d characterize my own journey over thirty years as “Healing comes from making distinctions.” I repeat this line regularly to other survivors of child sexual abuse. It is cornerstone in my book, *Restoring Sanctuary*, from which this essay is somewhat drawn.

Making distinctions has helped resolve terribly painful questions. For years, I believed I had caused predators to lose control. I confused my own self with the culprit. That falsehood was an impasse to healing. A bright line of distinction had to be drawn between an adult’s force and a child’s dependence. It was crucial to define a distinction between loving and grooming. I was capable of the former, my abusers expert at the latter.

All survivors of abuse grapple with shattered relationships. Because my abusers were Roman Catholic priests, my trust in the Church was broken too. Catholic religious and laity alike publicly seemed to agree victims should “just get over it,” as if any of us can heal by our own power without God’s graces or on any timing but God’s. They seemed to have blurred the distinction between forgiving and enabling, between predator and priest. I did not trust them.

Yet, when my focus returned to my own recovery, I faced the distinction between forgiveness and surrender. Forgiveness was impossible, surrender a little less impossible. I had

all the psychic resistance of any human to surrendering to a power greater than myself. My real problem was that I had entirely reasonable, additional cause to object. What I had learned about surrender already abusers had taught me early. Surrender was terrifying, painful, confusing. It created shame. It was annihilation. Looking back, it was not just like death. Parts of me really had died. It was reasonable not to repeat this.

So, another distinction was needed. This one was between gift and work. This was a tough truth about God's peace. I felt like I had earned my fragile peace. Its price was grief. It had been paid through years of arduous recovery work. Now I was entitled but getting nothing. It turns out that I was sorely mistaken. God's peace is never earned. It is a gift. Until I stopped reaching and opened my hand to receive, I remained at odds with the comfort I needed. The more I could imagine a gift and not a commodity, the more I started to notice one incredible gift in my faith recovery—moments of spontaneous joy I had not even known as a child.

Now I see more clearly how, back then, God was un-teaching me. I had to learn it was a false truth peddled by predator priests who trafficked in deception. The lesson was confounding. Yet, it alone would free me to receive simple, life-giving Truth. Surrender to God proved to be not just an abstract concept but a very real, concrete state of recovered human psychology.

Making distinctions has inspired something else quite unexpectedly. I have grown to appreciate the agony of priests who are confused for predators, or doubted as predators, or mocked publicly as predators. Their burden has become clear, yet still distinct from mine.

Forgiveness, for me, crept in, after surrender. Because every day requires many returns to God and surrenders to His love, I still forgive every day. Forgiveness was not closure for me. It was an opening—to ongoing surrender. This is what God returned in exchange for my broken heart, a forgiving willingness. This great thing has been accomplished not by my own power or will, but through His patient graces. He has been far more patient with and attentive to me than the Church, but that is also beginning to change. It's a change I choose to support.

Making distinctions, it turns out, creates opportunities to choose. The Creator of my psychology understood this, as I discovered in Deuteronomy 30:15. God says "I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil." Then, for a few verses God describes how choosing one brings destruction and estrangement, and choosing the other brings, well, life.

Some translations of these verses are pretty doomsday. Regardless, what I read was a call to proclaim my identity. I could now choose against the evil in my childhood and its lasting effects. I could now choose whatever slim goodness could be found in the moment instead of the many, many kinds of death available to dull psychic pain. The choice is tough. Its terms are formidable. From what I can see, it is never made definitively.

Free choice frees me to recapture something more from childhood. True choice was denied me by predator priests. Now, each time I choose, God has defined the options. These options are not deceptions. If I follow His guidance, I surrender God as the Author of my life. That familiar haunting depression, the doubt about how to live, those toxic temptations of shame—victory in these and many struggles had long eluded me. Now, they fall subject to moment-by-moment decisions between life and death, light and darkness.

With a God-based paradigm, I still make mistakes. I expect always to struggle with lasting effects of child abuse. Love continues to be fraught with reasonable doubt. But everything is made possible by integrating faith with recovery.

In retrospect, making distinctions has been a process of untangling my psyche from the snare of lies a predator creates. It helped open my heart and mind and life. I emerged from that psychological cringe we survivors know too well, where we retreated long ago as the perversion of words like caring, forgiveness and surrender was the only option we had.